

IJIRAIT

THE SHAPE
SHIFTERS

Hunting Far From Home

Once long ago there were two brothers, Oingoo and Ipeelee. Oingoo was older than Ipeelee and much more careful. Oingoo was an experienced hunter and had seen good years when there were lots of animals to hunt, and bad years when the men would hunt for days and find nothing. Oingoo's younger brother, Ipeelee, was less experienced and less careful. He was always laughing and making fun of how serious Oingoo was. But despite their differences, both brothers were very good friends.

In the early spring of the year when Ipeelee turned 16, Oingoo had decided to take his little brother on a hunting trip that took them far away from camp. They were away from home for many days, and they hunted many different animals. On this trip the brothers looked for various species of seal, the elusive arctic wolves, Peary caribou, the shaggy muskoxen and the mighty white bear of the north – the polar bear.

The hunting trip was very successful. They found many fat seal sunning themselves on the ice. These lazy seal were easy prey for the brothers. Both brothers had never seen so much wildlife. They found a valley full of muskoxen and had managed to get a few. Even a couple of wolves were unlucky enough to cross the path of these young hunters. Both of the brothers knew that their family and the whole camp would be very pleased with them.

Ipeelee was so excited during the whole trip. This had been the farthest away from camp he had ever been. Ipeelee kept racing his dogs far ahead of his brother's dog-team. As he passed he would yell, "Try and catch me brother. You don't want everyone at camp knowing how much faster my dogs are!" Oingoo would just shake his head and sigh. He often thought to himself, "How did I get such a silly little brother?"

On one of the last days of their hunt, when they were making camp for the evening, Oingoo felt he needed to remind his younger brother why they were hunting. He said to Ipeelee, "Don't forget why we are traveling so far from camp. We are hunting and hunting is very serious business and should not be taken lightly. We are responsible for providing meat and skins for our family back at the camp. The animals we shoot will feed us for many weeks, and the seal fat will help keep the qulliq burning. The skins of the animals we bring will be used to make clothing or maybe sleeping pads. The hide of the bearded seal we have caught will be cut into many strong ropes. All of these things are very important."

Ipeelee laughed and replied, "I know brother, but lets have fun as well." Oingoo smiled and shook his head.

I peelee had never known a hard year. Oingoo and the family had always spoiled their little brother. Because of this attention and his good luck, Ipeelee never really took anything too seriously.

They had caught many animals during the trip and their qamutiks were loaded down with meat and skins. Their dogs were having difficulty pulling the heavy qamutiks up hills and over rough ice. As well, both brothers were beginning to feel homesick, so they decided to head back to camp.

As they approached two large hills, the brothers saw the tall inukshuk that reminded them that they were getting close to home.

Oingoo noticed that the wind was picking up and it was starting to get dark.

Oingoo yelled out to his brother who was ahead, "Let's stop here and make camp for the night. The dogs are tired and we should be well rested, for the remainder of our trip home will be tough. There is a lot of bad ice in our way."

Ipeelee laughed and yelled back, "You are getting old, brother. Pretty soon I will be taking care of you."

Oingoo shook his head and smiled at his brother's teasing response.

As they set up camp and tied the dogs down for the night, Ipeelee kept bragging about how they were great hunters and that everyone at the camp would be so surprised when they saw how much they had caught.

Oingoo was older and much wiser. He told Ipeelee not to be so proud of the hunt. "We were very lucky to find so many animals and to have such favourable weather. I have been on hunts where we were stuck in our iglu for many days because of blizzards and we could not find any animals at all," Oingoo explained.

Ipeelee laughed at his brother and said, "As long as you have a great hunter like me with you, you will never go home hungry."

Oingoo shook his head and said, "My brother, you are young and bold. You must be careful because the arctic has a way of teaching us humility. Be careful for your lesson will probably be a painful one."

Ipeelee laughed and decided to go to bed. "You worry too much brother," was the last thing Ipeelee told his brother before he fell asleep.

In the morning Ipeelee awoke to the smell of tea. He yelled out, "Good morning brother!!! This day welcomes the great hunters."

"Alright, alright, quiet down and have some tea. We are almost home and I want to get an early start. We have a difficult day of travel ahead of us," Oingoo yelled back to Ipeelee.

After they had bannock and tea, the two brothers packed up camp and loaded their qamutiks. Oingoo told Ipeelee in a serious voice, "This is a very dangerous stretch of ice. There are many cracks and the ice is very rough. Today the traveling will be slow."

Oingoo paused and leaned closer to his brother. He whispered the rest of his message into his brother's ear. "Every time I pass this place I always feel like something is watching me. Please do not fool around today and stay behind me."

Ipeelee did not know if his brother was serious. Oingoo never seemed afraid of anything. Ipeelee did not believe all the stories and warnings the camp elders had told him when he was a child. Sure the stories had scared him when he was young but not now.

He decided not to make fun of his brother...for now, and to stay behind him until they got closer to home. You see Ipeelee wanted to be the first back to camp, so he could tell his family all about the hunt.

It was a clear day with a bit of ground wind. Ipeelee's dog-team was behind Oingoo's team. The slow and steady speed of Oingoo's dogs was beginning to annoy Ipeelee.

"Hurry up," Ipeelee kept shouting at his brother. It did not matter what Ipeelee said, Oingoo would not speed up. Oingoo scanned the horizon and studied the ice very carefully. Not only would Oingoo not speed up, but he would not look back or even respond to his brother. Oingoo was very focused on navigating through the rough ice.



This lack of attention bothered Ipeelee more than the slow speed of the dogs. Ipeelee could not take being ignored.

"HAAAAAAAA," Ipeelee yelled and his dogs began to speed up. "HAAAAAAAA," he yelled even louder and his dogs responded by increasing their speed again.

By the time Oingoo realized what was happening, it was too late. Ipeelee was moving too fast to stop him.

"Try and catch me brother, if you are not too old and frail," Ipeelee yelled and then whipped his dogs, making them run even faster.

"Ipeelee stop," yelled Oingoo. "Please stop," he yelled again. Ipeelee was moving too fast and was already too far away to clearly hear Oingoo's pleas.

Oingoo continued to wave and yell, but Ipeelee only looked back and laughed.

As Oingoo was trying to get the attention of his brother, he was not watching the trail and struck a large piece of ice with one of the qamutik runners. The impact caused the qamutik to flip and spill Oingoo onto the ice along with some of the load. Oingoo picked himself up and watched as his foolish brother disappeared into the distance.

Oingoo looked at the overturned qamutik with many of the supplies spread over the ice. He noticed his rifle some distance from the qamutik. He walked over to it and hesitated before picking it up. His rifle was broken and he did not have another.

This was not good. The trail home would take him into the river valley that always made him uncomfortable, and this time he had only his harpoon for protection.

A Foolish Brother

Ipeelee was laughing to himself as he travelled quickly over the ice. "I will be home first to tell everyone of our hunt and how easily I beat my brother," Ipeelee thought as he puffed his chest out with pride.

On and on he traveled. Oingoo was right about the ice; it was rough and there were many pressure cracks.

Ipeelee knew he was getting closer to home. The trail followed a river valley to the next inuksuk. "Not much longer now, maybe 5 or 6 more hours, and I will be home."

Ipeelee noticed that the temperature in the river valley was colder than it had been on the sea ice. "This is strange," he said to himself. This river ice seemed harder and rougher than the sea ice. The wind even seemed to be increasing.

Ipeelee started to feel strange. He felt like something was watching him pass through the valley. He turned and looked in all directions. He could not see anything to justify this strange feeling. Ipeelee began to feel cold, very cold and the hairs on the back of his neck began to stand up.

Ipeelee tried to shake off this feeling, and yelled at his dogs to go faster.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed something moving. He looked quickly and saw grey fur moving behind the broken ice and snow drifts.

"HAAAAA," he yelled to his dogs. "Crack - Crack." The snap of the whip made the dogs run even faster.

"What is following me?" Ipeelee wondered to himself. For the first time in his life, Ipeelee regretted not listening to his older brother.

Then he saw it, or rather he saw them. Two wolves were following him. He quickly reached for his rifle and aimed it at the wolves, as his dog-team pulled him and his heavy sled quickly up the valley.

"BANG!" The sound echoed off the hills.

At the sound of the gun, these fearless wolves moved even closer to Ipeelee's sled. Ipeelee noticed that the wolves were larger than most wolves he had seen, and as they glanced over at him he saw that their eyes were red, a dark blood red.

I peelee was so afraid but he could not turn his gaze away from the evil red eyes. By the time Ipeelee looked back at his dogs, it was too late.

"THUD!"

The qamutik hit a large rock and Ipeelee was thrown onto the rough river ice. The force of the collision tore Ipeelee's rifle from his hand and threw it far away from him.

The wind was knocked out of him and it felt like one of his ribs had broken. He struggled to his feet. When he finally stood up his legs felt unsteady and his vision was blurry. He could hear the loud growling of the dogs. As his eyes came into focus, he thought he saw one of the wolves changing into a large polar bear and attacking the dogs.

He shook his head and looked again. His eyes had not deceived him. Now there was a large polar bear standing in front of the dogs. Ipeelee's gaze then fell upon the other wolf which was also transforming into a monstrous bear.

The dogs were all tangled in the leads and ropes of the qamutik. They did not have a chance to run or fight back. These bear-creatures tore into the dogs mercilessly with their huge claws. The growls of the sled dogs quickly turned to whimpers and yelps of pain.

Ipeelee looked desperately for his rifle. He saw something metal in the snow and ran over to it. It was his rifle. Ipeelee grabbed it and pulled it from the snow. He lifted his rifle to his shoulder and tried to load it but a bullet was jammed in the chamber.

He tried frantically to fix his gun. Suddenly he noticed that the dogs had grown silent.

Ipeelee felt a sense of dread he had never before experienced. Slowly he looked up. To his amazement and horror he saw that all of the dogs had been killed and that one of the bear-creatures was changing again. This time the creature turned into an old man. The two creatures - the large polar bear and the twisted elder - had one very eerie similarity. They both had blood-red eyes that were now focused on Ipeelee.

The creatures began moving quickly towards Ipeelee. He could feel them coming fast. Ipeelee concentrated on trying to fix his gun. He tried and tried to remove the jammed bullet. No matter how hard he tried he could not get a grip on the jammed bullet because of the cold and the snow that covered the rifle.

Suddenly the bullet dislodged. With one quick motion he loaded a bullet into the chamber. He raised his gun up just in time to aim the barrel at the chest of the closest creature.

"BANG!" The sound echoed. The deafening roar of the rifle shot was followed by a supernatural scream - "AAAAAAAARRRRRR."

Ipeelee shot the large bear-creature in the center of its chest.

Blood began to stream down the bear's body. The creature was dying. But before the last bit of breath left its wounded body, it used its huge claw for one last act of evil. With all it remaining might, it swung its huge claw-like hand at Ipeelee and struck him in the chest.

"THUWAAAACK!"

Ipeelee was thrown a great distance and many bones in his chest broke under the force of the blow. As he coughed and sputtered, he tasted blood coming up from his lungs. He vision was blurring and darkening.

The last thing Ipeelee saw before he died was the other creature, in human form, walking towards him. He saw the creature smiling and its red eyes seemed to dance with excitement.

A Brother Alone

Oingoo had successfully repaired his qamutik and was travelling fast trying to catch up with his foolish younger brother. The wind was picking up and beginning to cover his brother's tracks.

On and on Oingoo pushed his dog-team. He did not want to lose his brother's trail. Ipeelee may have been foolish and arrogant but Oingoo loved his brother and wanted to keep him safe.

In the distance Oingoo heard a sound that made his heart sink. It was the sound of a gun going off. It was hard to hear over the wind, but Oingoo heard it. He yelled at his dogs and snapped his whip. "CRACK!" His dogs began to run faster.

On and on Oingoo went, pushing his dogs to run faster and faster. He knew they could not sustain this pace for much longer. Oingoo was concerned. Why had his brother discharged his rifle? The qamutiks were already loaded down with animals, so he could not be hunting. Could he?

And then he heard it again but this time it was louder. "Bang!" It was the sound of a rifle going off again, closer this time.

As Oingoo's dog team entered the river valley, he noticed the temperature dropping and the wind picking up. Oingoo knew this valley. This was the place that always made him feel like something was watching him.

He slowed his dogs down and reached for his harpoon since his rifle was no longer working. Oingoo also made sure his knife was safely on his belt.

As he rounded a bend in the valley he saw his brother's qamutik in the distance. When he approached, he noticed that it was turned over and the snow surrounding it was stained red. His heart sank; he knew something very bad had happened.

Oingoo yelled and yelled but there was no sign of Ipeelee. He stopped his dogs just short of his brother's overturned qamutik. Oingoo drove his snow-anchor into the snow, so his dogs could not take off. His dogs growled and whined. The dogs seem to know that something evil lived in this river valley, and they did not like stopping here.

Oingoo walked around his brother's qamutik and saw that all the sled dogs were dead, covered with claw marks.

He walked further and found the body of his brother and a dead polar bear near by. Oingoo was overcome with grief. He ran to his brother's body to see if he was still alive. As Oingoo drew nearer, he saw that Ipeelee was very still and cold. Oingoo knew that his brother was dead.

Oingoo's eyes began to tear up. He knelt beside his brother's body and began to cry. "Why did you not listen to me?" he yelled.

Oingoo turned and looked at the dead bear angrily. Through his tears he noticed that the bear was huge with massive paws and long unnatural claws. Never had he seen a polar bear like this before. He walked over to get a better look at the bear and saw its strange eyes. They were larger than normal and red. This was not a regular polar bear.

Oingoo knew what this was. He remembered the elders telling stories of shape-shifters called the Ijirait. The elders warned that these demon-creatures sometimes hid and waited for travellers to pass. And if the travellers were alone and unprepared, the Ijirait would sometimes hunt them down.

Oingoo was suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling that something was watching him.

He spun around and found an old man staring at him. Oingoo called out to the old man, "What happened here?" The old man began to walk towards him. "What happened here?" Oingoo questioned again.

As the stranger got closer, Oingoo could see the old man's face. It was full of wrinkles with a huge grin and large red eyes. Oingoo recognized what was standing in front of him – it was not an elder; this was another Ijirait.

Oingoo began backing up slowly and he drew his knife.

The red-eyed elder's smile grew larger, and he began to change right before Oingoo's eyes. The elder was becoming large and furry. Oingoo recognized what the Ijirait was turning into – a polar bear.

Oingoo had one chance. He turned and ran as fast as he could. Behind him he could hear the sound of the Ijirait following him. With each step the Ijirait sounded heavier and heavier. Oingoo knew that the Ijirait had almost completely transformed into a large bear.

Oingoo saw his dogs growling and barking. They were jumping and trying to free themselves from the sled. With the last bit of strength left in Oingoo's body, he jumped onto his sled and used his knife to cut the leads that were holding the dogs back.

All the dogs, now free, jumped onto the large demon bear. The Ijirait screamed as the dogs bit into its evil flesh. The creature spun around and tried to hit the dogs with its large claws, but they were too fast and quickly moved out of the way.

The dogs surrounded the demon bear. They took turns jumping and biting the bear and then running away. The bear was trapped. Every time it turned to attack a dog that had bitten it, another one attacked it from behind. The once white fur of the bear was beginning to show streaks of red.

One of the younger dogs bit down on the Ijirait's leg but did not jump back fast enough. "THWAAACK!" The massive paws of the Ijirait hit the dog and flipped it back a great distance. The young dog was dead before it landed.

Oingoo was trying to catch his breath. He knew he had to act fast before too many of his dogs were killed. He grabbed his harpoon and headed towards the bear.

Oingoo knew how to hunt bear with a harpoon. Many younger hunters do not know how to do this, but Oingoo remembered seeing his dad do it long ago. Oingoo knew he had to be patient. He let the bear focus its attention on the dogs. The bear would run forward and swat at a dog with its massive paw. After the bear had swung at the dog, it backed up into its original place and tried to attack another dog. As the bear was retreating it was vulnerable for a few seconds.

Oingoo quietly waited for the bear to attack a dog close to him. Oingoo watched as the bear was driven into a frenzy by the dogs. The bear tried and tried to catch another dog with its huge claws, but all of its energy was wasted. The Ijirait could not catch the experienced older dogs, and now it was weakening.

All of a sudden, the bear turned its attention to the dog that was nearest to Oingoo. The bear rushed out at the dog and swung at it. The dog easily jumped back and avoided the Ijirait's paw. As the creature was backing up into its original position again, Oingoo saw his chance and drove the harpoon into the bear's side. The harpoon struck the bear hard and sank deep into its side.

ROOOOAAAAR! The Ijirait screamed as it felt the sting of the harpoon piercing its body.

Oingoo quickly moved back and removed the harpoon shaft leaving the sharp head of the harpoon still inside of the bear. The bear swung around to face Oingoo, but the dogs attacked it from behind and forced the evil Ijirait to turn and deal with them.

The Ijirait realized it was in danger and suddenly began changing again. This time it was transforming into a large black raven. Frightened and confused by the transformation, the dogs began to back away. The monstrous raven seized this advantage and took flight.

The head of the harpoon, however, was still buried deep in the demon's side. Oingoo grabbed the rope that connected the harpoon head to the shaft and held with all his might. Oingoo could barely hold onto the rope. The monstrous raven had powerful wings and was beginning to drag and lift Oingoo. The raven pulled so hard that the rope began to cut into Oingoo's hands, but still he did not let go. With all his remaining strength, Oingoo held onto the rope; he did not want the creature that killed his brother to escape.

"CAAAAWWW!" The creature screamed at Oingoo for preventing its escape. The blood loss and the fighting with the dogs had taken its toll on the Ijirait and it was beginning to tire. Oingoo could feel it tiring and began to pull on the rope.

The lead dog sensed the Ijirait's growing fatigue as well. The old lead dog jumped up and grabbed the Ijirait's leg. The wounded monster screamed and kicked, but it could not shake the old dog off. The weakened Ijirait could not fly with the weight of the dog on it and they both fell together to the ground. Even the hard impact of the fall did not loosen the old dog's hold on the Ijirait's leg. The Ijirait was pinned down on the ice by this wise old dog. The remaining dogs jumped on top of the monster and in a frenzied attack killed the demon raven.

Once the creature stopped moving, and the dogs were sure it was dead, some of the dogs ran over to their master. Oingoo was on his hands and knees, panting. "Good dogs...good dogs...good dogs," Oingoo kept repeating between his deep breathes.

Although he was exhausted, Oingoo knew he had to get out of this valley. He got to his feet and gathered his dogs.

As fast as he could, he fixed the cut leads so he could hitch the dogs back to the qamutik. With the help of one of the dogs, Oingoo dragged his brother's body back to the sled. He then used the remaining rope to lash his brother's body onto the qamutik.

As soon as he was finished, Oingoo yelled at the dogs to start moving.

Oingoo kept the dogs constantly moving but at a slow and safer pace. His heart was pounding the whole trip through the river valley. On and on he traveled. The sun was beginning to drop below the horizon, but on he went. Nothing would make him stop again in this valley.

Oingoo sighed with relief as he saw the end of the valley. He was going to make it out of this evil place. In a few hours he would be home and safe. Oingoo and his family would bury Ipeelee when he got back home.

Just as Oingoo was leaving this cold river valley, something caught his attention. It was a group of ravens scavenging the carcass of a caribou that had died some days earlier. He stared at the birds picking at the carcass.

The light was fading fast, but Oingoo decided that he would not stop until he reached the camp. Just before he turned his attention away from the group of ravens and their feast, Oingoo noticed two of the larger ravens had turned to look at him. There was so little light it was hard to see these strange black birds. Oingoo squinted to see them better. As he did, Oingoo's eyes widened and his heart sank... these birds were staring back at him with evil red eyes.

